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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the communication preferences of graduate students in the teacher education program in Deaf Education at Gallaudet University (District of Columbia). Thirty-seven (of 76) full-time students in the Master's program completed a questionnaire. Forty percent of the students were deaf or hard of hearing and 49 percent were students in their first year. The participants were asked to select among the following preferred classroom communication options: (1) voice-off signing, no interpretation; (2) voice-off signing, voice interpreter for those desiring it; (3) simcom, no interpretation; (4) simcom, parallel American Sign Language interpretation; and (5) voice only. Regardless of which of the five classroom communication situations were being considered, the student's hearing status, or stage in the program, the students indicated an overwhelming preference for voice-off signing without an interpreter and a consistent disdain for simcom. Among the conclusions of the study were the following: communication preferences are essentially the same for deaf and hearing students and for first and second year students; almost none of the students prefers voice-off signing for all classroom communication; most students do not see a need to accommodate different communication preferences, backgrounds, or needs; almost no students prefer simcom, especially with a parallel interpreter; and concerns about developing sign language skills outweigh concerns about missing course content. Implications for teacher preparation programs are drawn. (DB)

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Teacher Trainees' Classroom Communication Preferences

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Communication is often problematic in "contact-signing" situations with mixtures of individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing, and a wide range of sign language skills and preferences for both receptive and expressive language. Regardless of whether ASL, spoken English, or simcom is used, problems are inherent in every option, including problems of accessibility, turn-taking, signal interference, and cost. Even with facilitation by an interpreter, some individuals will be able neither to understand nor to participate as fully as others.

Teacher preparation programs in deaf education are particularly "at-risk" for the problems inherent in situations with individuals having varying abilities to receive and express language visually and auditorily. Several recent trends account for these difficulties: goals to increase the number of qualified deaf and hard of hearing teachers, emphases on recruiting diverse student bodies; increased priority on increasing graduates' sign language proficiency; and increased use of discussions and group work—rather than straight lecture—to facilitate learning in teacher education programs.

Graduate classes in the Education Department at Gallaudet University frequently include mixtures of deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing individuals, and a wide range of sign language skills and preferences. Regardless of the communication arrangements which the instructor or students decide, some of the problems outlined above occur, and students suffer by being left out or missing course content.

The purpose of the present study was to ascertain the communication preferences of graduate students in the teacher preparation program in Deaf Education at Gallaudet University. A one-page questionnaire was distributed to the 76 current full-time master's students in the program. Thirty-seven (49%) of the students returned the questionnaires, 40 percent of whom were deaf or hard of hearing, and 49 percent of whom were first-year students.

With the directions for completing the questionnaire, the students were given information on the advantages and disadvantages of five different communication options: (1) voice-off signing, no interpretation; (2) voice-off signing, voice interpreter for those desiring it; (3) simcom, no interpretation; (4) simcom, parallel ASL interpretation; and (5) voice only, ASL interpretation). They were asked to indicate which of the five options were their first and second choices for four communication situations: "receiving information from the instructor;" "receiving information from my classmates;" "providing information to the instructor;" and "providing information to my classmates." Regardless of the communication situation, hearing status, or stage in the program, the students indicated an overwhelming preference for voice-off signing without an interpreter, and a consistent disdain for simcom.

The students also were invited to provide comments on the questionnaire. Five themes were repeated in their comments:

- Voice-off helps students become better signers.
- Various options cause some students to miss information in class.

- Future teachers of deaf students should have good sign language skills.
- The instructor's signing skill should be a determining factor in the use of an interpreter.
- ASL is a language of the deaf and should be mandatory in the Gallaudet experience.

Although limited in scope and confined to a somewhat unique environment, five specific conclusions can be derived from this study:

- Communication preferences are essentially the same for deaf and hearing students, and for 1st- and 2nd-year students.
- Almost all students prefer voice-off signing for all classroom communication.
- Conversely, most students do not see a need to accommodate (nor even to tolerate) different communication preferences, backgrounds, or needs.
- Almost none of the students prefers simcom, especially with a parallel interpreter, regardless of the interaction.
- Concerns about developing sign language skills outweigh concerns about missing course content.

These conclusions raise issues for a number of situations, but especially for other teacher education programs with diverse student populations in which sign language skill is a priority. First, programs should recognize that without

a common language base, in terms of both receiving and expressing language, all students cannot be on an equal footing. While a program may desire to increase the number of qualified deaf and hard-of-hearing teachers it prepares, having them rely on interpreters puts them at a disadvantage compared to hearing teacher trainees, especially in terms of participation in class discussions and group activities. While interpreters may facilitate the communication environment, the role of the interpreter should be flexible, and hearing individuals, including faculty members, may need to be the ones who are viewed as the interpreters' clients, rather than the students who are deaf.

Second, with increasingly diverse student populations—especially diversity in ability to *receive* language in either an auditory or visual mode—both teacher educators and teacher trainees need to be more accommodating of individual needs and preferences. Finding practical ways to do this is not simple. Ideally, teacher educators in deaf education need the facility to switch languages, modes, and codes—which is good modeling for future teachers of deaf and hard-of-hearing students, as well as facilitating communication in a diverse classroom. Teacher educators also need to expand communication in their classes to include greatly increased use of print and computer media, learning centers, activities, and peer tutoring to facilitate communication and learning.

Finally, while teacher preparation programs should not ensure that incoming students have sufficient hearing to understand speech, they can ensure

that incoming students and teacher educators are able to receive and to use sign language and thereby reduce the range of communication needs in the teacher education classroom. Increasing the diversity of teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students and ensuring their sign language proficiency are extremely desirable goals. While these goals may have introduced a communication dilemma in teacher education classrooms, resolving that dilemma will result in better-prepared teachers for students who are deaf and hard of hearing.